Multi-discursive Things: A Monolithic Tale of Sorts[1]

Luke Jaaniste[2]
Queensland University of Technology, Creative Industries Faculty

This essay examines how certain cultural objects are appropriated by and come to concurrently operate within different discourses, such that we can describe them as multi-discursive things. I begin by tracing a theory of cultural objects that amalgamates the efforts of Hartley and McHoul. Then, by way of example, I tell three tales of alien monoliths. The first is the cosmic tale of the mysterious monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (dir Stanley Kubrick, 1968). The second is the infamous public art commission *Tilted Arc* (by Richard Serra, 1981-89). And the third involves an architectural displacement in a contemporary art gallery (by Dion Workman, 1994). I then consider their relationships to the spaces of uncertainty in the urban realm otherwise known as public space. By doing so, I hope to open up a way of thinking about the production of cultural objects (via such things as art making, urban design, writing etc) which doesn't begin within a single enframing discourse, but roams through and is a conduit for a range of resonating yet conflicting discourses. Such an approach still deals in the traditional tropes of aesthetic ambiguity and cultural criticality, but here the ambiguity is located in the very identity of the cultural object itself, which in turn reveals the essential multi-discursive dynamics of the contemporary urban realm.

Introduction

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Multi-discursivity: words and objects

John Hartley, one of the authors of *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies* (1993), found it necessary to invent the term 'multi-discursive' whilst compiling the book, in order to address how words like 'culture' play out in multiple discourses. In the entry on 'multi-discursive', Hartley (1993) proposed the following:

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[2] To contact the author of this article, write to him at l.jaaniste@qut.edu.au

> Concepts are said to be multi-discursive when they can be found to have significantly *different meanings or connotations according to their use within different discourses*. The kinds of words that can be described as multi-discursive are those, like culture, that depend to a very large extent on their [discursive] context for their meaning to be clear…
>
> [Furthermore] it remains that case that the word's use in other discourses will *continue to resonate*, as it were, in any one instance…
>
> [D]ifferent discourses… mobilize the same term in different ways *concurrently*, so that two or more meanings are current at once, and tend to limit, regulate or disrupt each other. (190-191, my emphasis)

Hartley further explains in the entry on 'culture' that

> you cannot import a fixed definition into any and every context and expect it to make sense. What you have to do is *identify the discursive context itself*. [For the term 'culture'] it may be the discourse of nationalism, fashion, anthropology, literary criticism, viti-culture, Marxism, feminism, cultural studies, or even common sense. (68-69, my emphasis)

So the term 'culture' gets picked up and mobilised within different discourses to different effect, and these differences impinge on one another. Some writers have applied Hartley's notion of multi-discursivity to other key terms such as 'interaction' (Jensen 1998), 'project work' (Nielsen & Webb 1999), and 'ideology' (Johnson 2002). Further key terms that come to mind are 'art', 'design', 'value', 'natural' and 'terror' and there would no doubt be many more to add to this list.

But my concern here is not primarily that of words, but rather that of aesthetic artefacts. So how does the notion of 'multi-discursivity' play out within the materiality of such objects, rather than in the semantics of words? Alec McHoul's proposal regarding the 'appropriability' of cultural objects is worthy of consideration here. In his essay 'Ordinary Heterodoxies: Towards a Theory of Cultural Objects' (1997)[i] McHoul ponders over "what counts as a cultural object" (7), that is, "whatever it is that people can produce-and-recognise *as* something… whatever people know-and-use" (8, original emphasis). Because cultural objects always have a specificity, used and known (and later analysed) within a particular set of circumstances as something-in-particular, we think of cultural objects are being owned or belonging to a particular cultural cohort. Thus, for McHoul, the question of what counts as a cultural object becomes the question of what counts as cultural ownership. This much McHoul draws from Wes Sharrock's earlier work 'On Owning Knowledge' (1994[1974]). But McHoul notes that all of Sharrock's examples of ownership are defined in terms of the possibility of dis-ownership or *non*-attachment, of being borrowed, stolen and misappropriated. McHoul goes on to propose that

> What would determine any cultural object, as a specifically cultural object or, which is the same thing, as an object pertaining to a specific culture, would be its condition (though not necessarily its instanciation [*sic*] of that condition) as potentially impure, improper, misused and so on. Going a little further, we would say that cultural objects are marked by the *essentiality* of their *possible*

> dis-ownership… – by the fact that they can always come to mean things, to be recognised, to be used, to be known, to be governed, and cared for in *at least two* (frequently more) different cultural systems, different assemblages of production and recognition. (10-11, original emphasis)

Such a principle or condition of 'appropriability' – to be a cultural object is to be appropriable – is located at the 'macro-cultural' level (the difference between national styles) and also the 'micrological' level of material artefacts. McHoul's micrological example is the tea cup, which *must* carry with it other possibilities of meanings and use beyond a functional domestic object within a certain setting, for instance, the possibility of being taken as an aesthetic object (in terms of shape, colour and pattern) or a technological object (in terms of the physics and processes attached to its manufacture). Note that McHoul says that cultural objects carry the *possibility* of being appropriated into other cultural systems. He is not saying that cultural objects always display an instantiation of its appropriability, in fact, like a teacup, we would expect most cultural objects most of the time to operate within a cultural system *as if* that is where they wholly belonged.

With McHoul's ideas in mind, I want to now re-consider Hartley's notion of multi-discursivity. To do so I will assume a few basic conversions in the terms used by these two writers. Firstly, I take "different cultural systems" (McHoul) to equate to "different discourses" (Hartley) if we adopt an expanded (Foucaldian) understanding of discourses (both are "assemblages of production and recognition" (McHoul)). Secondly, I take "concepts" and "words" (Hartley), and indeed also linguistic utterances, to be certain types of "cultural objects" (McHoul). This being the case, I then take "appropriability" (McHoul) – the fundamental possibility of cultural objects belonging to different cultural systems (discourses) – equates to the possibility of being "multi-discursive" (Hartley). If we take McHoul's argument for the appropriability/multi-discursivity of all cultural objects, we might then want to criticize Hartley for presenting a naive notion that only some words and concepts are multi-discursive, as if it is an exception rather than the rule. But this would be to miss the difference in the tack of both writers. McHoul argues for the multi-discursivity of all cultural objects as an essential possibility of those objects, whilst Hartley calls multi-discursive those cultural objects that are an actual instantiation of this essential multi-discursive possibility. And whilst it is McHoul who argues for this essential possibility, it is Hartley who emphasises the tensions involved in instances of multi-discursivity, as the meanings associated with different discourses "resonate" within each other and "tend to limit, regulate or disrupt each other".

The combination of McHoul and Hartley can be summarised as follows: *all cultural objects are always potentially multi-discursive,* but the extent to which a cultural object actually reveals or instantiates this potential differs, such that *only those which instantiate a high degree of multi-discursivity we would call multi-discursive*, and in such instances, *multiple discourses and their meanings tend to resonate and disturb each other*.

In what follows I want to explore several cultural artefacts which I will properly call multi-discursive things. To do so I will tell three tales that come from the 1960s, 1980s and 1990s respectively. They are the tales of *monoliths* and the different *sorts* of discourses within which they are appropriated and mobilize – and this is why, as per this essay's title, the issue of multi-discursive things, as I tell it, is a monolithic

tale of sorts. What discourses come to bear of these monoliths will arise in the telling of the tales, but already by way of McHoul's teacup we might expect the discourses surroundings practical usages, technological systems and aesthetic understandings.

Three monolithic tales…

The first tale – from outer space

This first tale comes from the 1960s, and presents a classic example of a multi-discursive thing. It is the story of the mysterious monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1968), a story that spans eons of time, from prehistory to the future and into the infinite. My synopsis below follows the film's four episodes (three of which are titled, documentary style) and casts the monolith as the key narrative link and antagonist.[ii]

Episode 1, '*The Dawn of Man*': The first thirty minutes of the film, which is in almost complete silence, follows a prehistoric ape colony. Out-of-the-blue (quite literally), they are visited by a mysterious black rectangular *monolith* (Figure 1) after which, an ape-man makes an evolutionary breakthrough and discovers that bones could be used like clubs for killing. The monolith, it appears, has endowed the apes with intelligence, marking the beginnings of primitive technology on earth. Here, the monolith functions as a deity or religious-totem.

Episode 2, The Lunar Journey in the Year 2000 (not titled): The film then cuts to the year 2000, via the famous segue of a prehistoric bone thrown in the air to a similarly-shaped space ship. A *second* monolith has been discovered on the lunar surface (Figure 2) and the film follows a team of scientists visiting the excavation site. They happen to be there as the moon enters a lunar day, and the sunlight from the rising sun suddenly triggers the monolith to send out a radio signal that is heard as a loud squeal in the men's helmets. Here, the monolith functions as a solar-powered radio beacon, making it a piece of scientific-telecommunications-technology.

Episode 3, 'Jupiter Mission, 18 Months Later': The film's next setting is on board the spaceship Discovery on a mission to the planet Jupiter, whereto the radio signal from the lunar-based monolithic was sent. The occupants are the two astronauts Dave Bowman and Frank Poole, three hibernating scientists, and the super-computer HAL who communicates to the crew through his single red eye. HAL is the only one to know the real reason for the mission. Things are uneventful until HAL makes a diagnostic error and the two astronauts plan to shut him down. However, HAL makes his own plans and manages to kill all the occupants but Dave.

Episode 4, 'Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite': After Dave, the only survivor, terminally shuts down HAL, he alone makes it to Jupiter, where he encounters a third and fourth monolith. The *third* monolith is seen floating in space (Figure 3), in a mystical alignment of the planets, and here the monolith becomes an artificial satellite of Jupiter, or perhaps an alien spacecraft. Dave goes to investigate in a space pod and is sucked into a psychodelic time-warp through to another dimension.

The film jumps setting again, to shots of Dave in a Victorian-style bedroom suite (but where? in another dimension?) presumably made for him by aliens connected to the monolith, where he is to live out his days. Here we meet the *fourth* and final monolith, which presides over what will become Dave's deathbed (Figure 4). In this setting, the monolith looks remarkably like a minimalist sculpture, the sort to be first shown at art

galleries in New York in the mid 1960s – a connection that director Kubrick would certainly have been aware of. Here, the monolith becomes an aesthetic artefact. But Kubrick would not have anticipated that by the turn of this century, the monolith could now be re-read as a flat-screen TV, an object of entertainment.

To conclude this synopsis, I should note that Dave does not just die, but in the last shot of the film, is reborn as a star-child, floating in space.

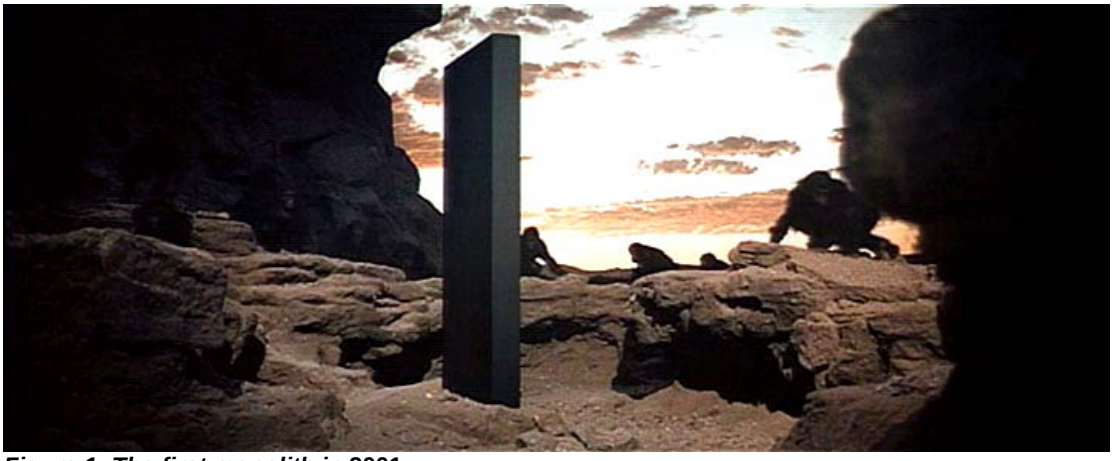


***Figure 1: The first monolith in* 2001.**
Scene from the first episode ('The Dawn of Man') in 2001: A Space Odyssey*. The monolith is in the centre, and the black silhouettes on the rock face and the large black silhouette on the right are apes.*

***Figure 2: The second monolith in* 2001.**
Scene from the second episode (lunar journey in the year 2000) in 2001: A Space Odyssey*. Again, the monolith is in the centre, this time surrounded by astronauts and scientists in space suits. In this shot, the site is still under the darkness of a lunar night.*

***Figure 3: The third monolith in* 2001.**
Scene from the fourth episode ('Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite') in 2001: A Space Odyssey. *The monolith is floating horizontally 'between' several planets, mid frame. The reflection from its surface gives it the appearance of a white-ish beam.*

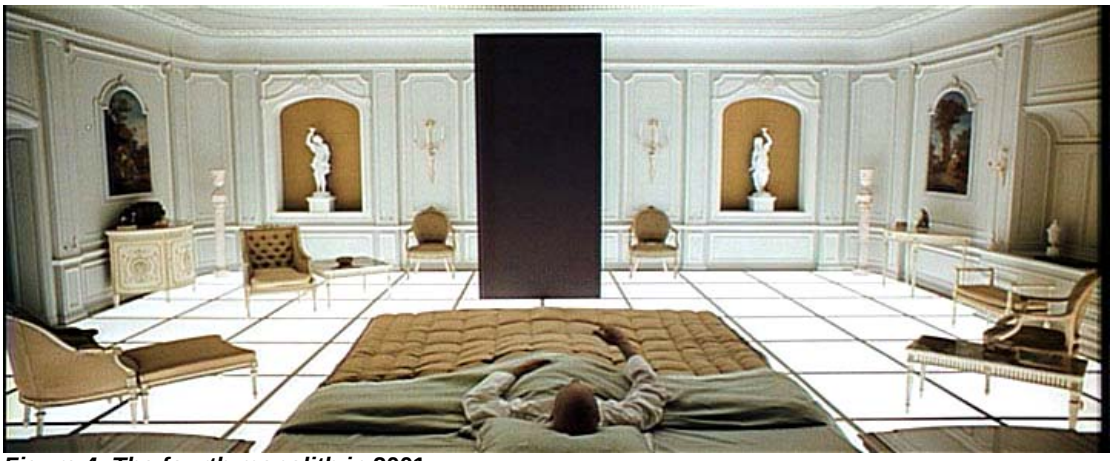


***Figure 4: The fourth monolith in* 2001.**
Scene from the fourth episode ('Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite') in 2001: A Space Odyssey. *The monolith stands centre-screen, directly facing an aged Dave who is lying in bed.*

As I have just outlined, *2001: A Space Odyssey* was a tale of four monoliths. Each had the same colour, the same dimensions and presumably the same mysterious solid materiality, perhaps made out of metal, perhaps made out of some sort of alien super-compound. Therefore, on a simple material level, we can think of the monoliths as one-and-the-same thing. But in the four visitations of the monolith, this big black rectangular alien thing became four different objects, or we could say, *this alien thing performed as a cultural object within four different discourses*: at first a religious discourse, then a scientific-telecommunications discourse, then a scientific-vehicular discourse, and finally an arts-entertainment discourse.

There is one sense, however, in which the monolith is not ranging through multiple discourses, but is secured within what I call a *single enframing discourse*, and this is the discourse of film that enframes (and in this sense dominates) the narrative within it. What I mean is this: from the points-of-view taken *within* the film's narrative, the monolith is multi-discursive, but from the point-of-view of the film-goer, someone watching the film in a cinema or at home, the monolith is stably and safely located as a filmic device. The film-goer is under no hesitation that they are watching a film that is operating stably within a film discourse. And in this sense, as filmic device, the monolith is no alien thing.

Given this viewpoint 'outside' the film's narrative, when we hop back 'inside' the film to the points-of-view in its narrative, it becomes clear why the monolith is an alien thing. *It is an alien thing because it was something that was not or could not be identified as belonging to any one single enframing discourse.* It was alien from all our discourses. It had no discursive home-base, as it were. Kubrick works this to great effect, since we never meet the supposed 'creators' of the monoliths (or perhaps the monoliths are sentient beings themselves) and are not given any real clue as to who or what they are, adding to the mystery of the film (and spawning many speculations and discussions since about the meaning of the monoliths and the film more broadly).

I now want to turn to the tales of other monoliths, ones that do not need to traverse time nor space to enact their multi-discursivity.

The second tale – from public space

The next tale is from the 1980s, which also involves an alien monolith, this time in the contemporary urban public space. It is the tale of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* and is an infamous account of public art in America. In 1979, Serra, a famous American sculptor who predominantly works with massive metal plates, was commissioned through an Arts-in-Architecture program. The commission was to place a public art sculpture in the Federal Plaza of New York City in downtown Manhattan, a typical plainly paved city-square bounded by a street and austere modernist city buildings. The sculpture, aptly called *Tilted Arc* (Figure 5), was installed in 1981 and is somewhat typical in form and scale of Serra's public art commissions. It was a curved wall of raw steel, about forty metres long and three metres high, positioned to cut the plaza in half. Those walking through the plaza needed to circumvent this huge monolith in order to get from one side to the other.

Figure 5: Richard Serra's* Tilted Arc *(1981-89), Federal Plaza, New York City.
Photo by David Aschkenas (1985). The angle of this image produces a considerable fore-shortening effect, making the width of the steel structure appear much less that it is.

Such a large cut into the space was of course to lead to controversy, and in 1985, a special and controversial hearing was held to determine whether or not the sculpture should be dismantled or relocated. Submissions were made by Serra and his artworld supporters, local business people and residents, and civic authorities. The jury voted in favour of removing the sculpture, which finally occurred in 1989 against Serra's wishes. My purpose is not to go into the details of the hearing – there are many articles and books that do this.[iii] Rather I want to overview the multiple discourses that played out in the arguments for-and-against the sculpture. That is, I want to consider the *Arc* as a multi-discursive thing, beginning with the most obvious discourse that was mapped on the *Arc*, before moving onto other discourses in the public realm.

An Art discourse: Serra and his supporters hung their arguments on the *Arc*'s art-status, implying that its worth and long-term prospects could only be judged by art experts. They sort to secure the *Arc* within the discourse of art. In particular, it was framed as 'site-specific art', as if to redeem it simply because of this utterance.[iv] However three other intersecting discourses, beyond an art discourse, were mapped on the *Arc*.

A Built Environment discourse: Put simply, many of the plaza office workers testified that the *Arc* was a hassle to walk around. This moved the *Arc* into the discursive region of Architecture and the design of Built Environment, and shifted authority to town planners and civic architects.

A Security Discourse: More than just an obstacle to pedestrian flows, the *Arc* was also discussed as a security hazard, and a threat to public safety. In terms of surveillance and terrorist discourses of the time, the *Arc* was framed as an impediment for the gaze of security officers. The *Arc* was a wall to hide behind, take drugs, and could even have been used by terrorists as a blasting wall for bombs.

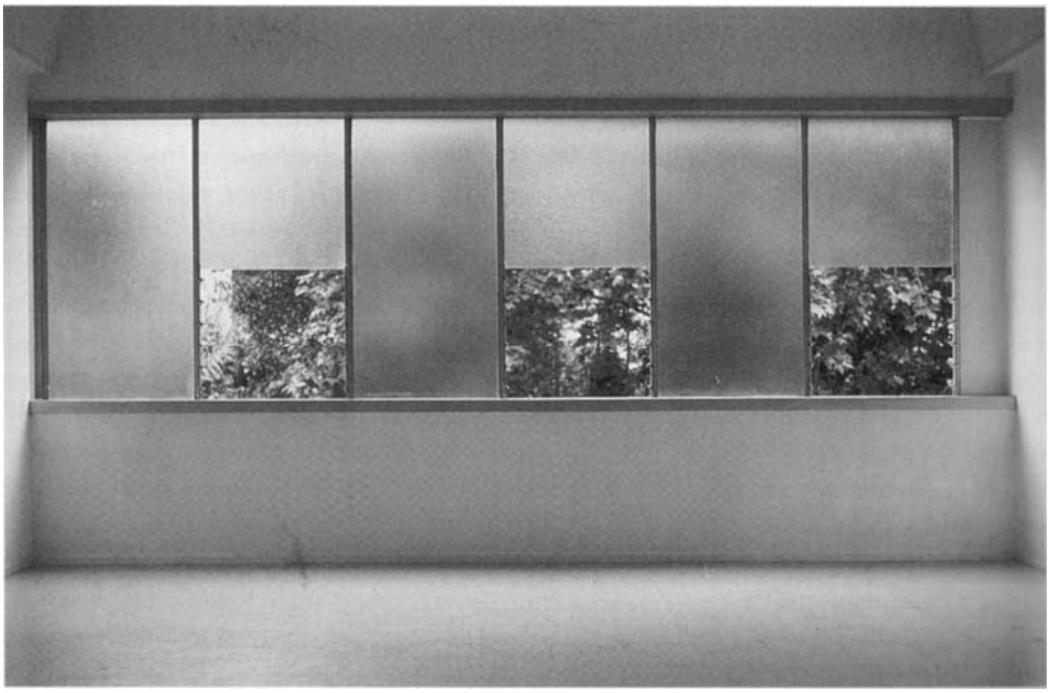
A Graffiti Discourse: Finally, in a complicated manoeuvre, the *Arc* was framed as a graffiti wall, and it did actually perform this function (though I have found no photos that directly show this). The complication was that the graffiti discourse was employed both against *and* for the sculpture. The argument against was expected, and linked to the security discourse. The argument for the *Arc* came in the form of testimonies presented by prominent New York graffiti writers who had already tagged the sculpture. Graffiti, itself argued by the writers as art, was employed to christen and re-confirm the sculpture within an art discourse.[v]

Thus, into the Federal Plaza came this alien thing, a curved steel monolith, which became caught up and appropriated in multiple discourses of contemporary public city space. We might ask: what was the *Arc* really? What it sculpture? Graffiti wall? Urban design obstacle? Security threat? The answer, like that of the status of the multi-discursive word 'culture', is: all-of-the-above. As Hartley (1993:68) says: "you cannot import a fixed [single enframing] definition into any and every context and expect it to make sense." Many artist and art critics would disagree with me on this point, wanting to give the *Arc* the single enframing discourse of art. But just like Stanley Kubrick's monolith, Serra's monolith performed within multi-discourses. The difference here is that the multiple discourses were superimposed in the one time and space – the urban public realm – rather than spread across vast – cosmic – amounts of time and space.

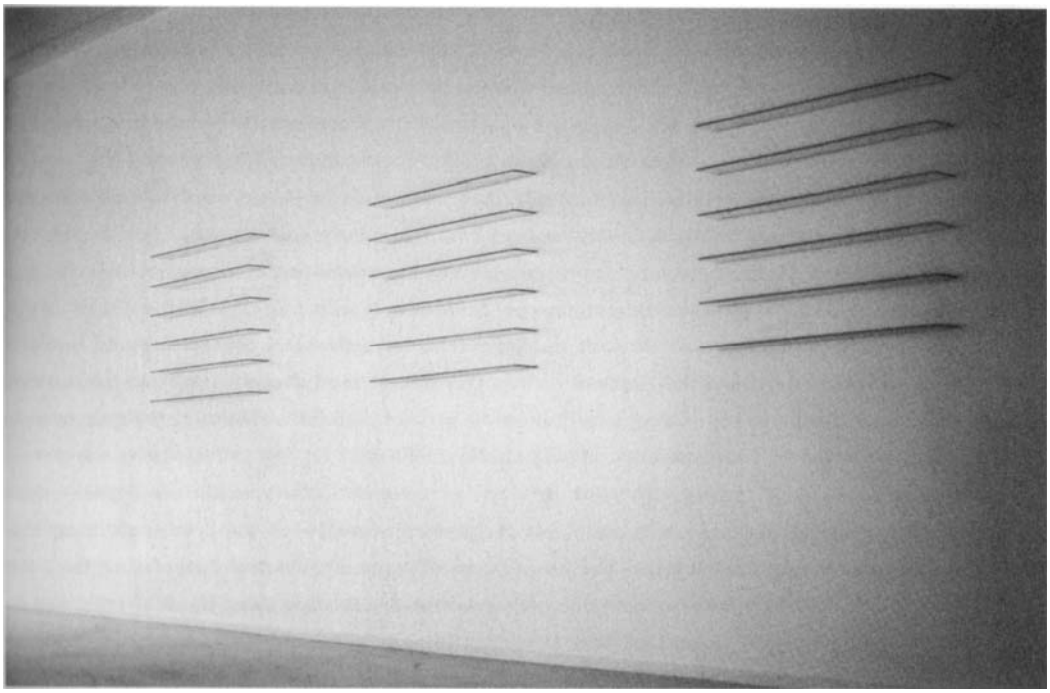
<u>The third tale – from museum space</u>

Now we move to a tale from the 1990s, this time not in an outdoor urban public space, but in an indoor urban museum. It involves an installation by New Zealander Dion Workman, who used to be a visual artist but is currently working solely in electronic music and sound art. The work in question was located in an Auckland gallery in 1994, was untitled, but its explanatory subtitle 'architectural displacement' gives a clue to its form and how it was made. Workman worked with the room's pre-existing features, namely three sets of glass louvres from one wall of windows (Figure 6). The louvres were removed and set horizontally into the opposite wall in three rows (Figure 7), matching exactly the layout of the windows they came from, which were

now vacant. One can even think of this work as a set of little wall-bound monoliths (mini-liths!).



Figures 6: Dion Workman's* untitled *(1994), 23A Gallery, Auckland.
Three sets of louvres removed from a wall of windows.



Figures 7: Dion Workman's* untitled *(1994), 23A Gallery, Auckland.
Three sets of louvres stuck horizontally into a gallery wall, directly opposite the windows from which they were removed (see Figure 6).

What are the discourses put into play in this manoeuvre by Workman? They include two art discourses – sculpture and painting – and two built environment discourses – furniture and interior design.

Sculpture: The louvres can easily be interpreted as minimalist wall reliefs, in the fashion of the untitled 'wall stacks' that have been produced by American minimalist artist Donald Judd since the mid 1960s. Judd's wall stacks involved a number of thick rectangular plates or prisms each stuck to a wall on their thin edge, and 'stacked' or spaced out vertically one underneath the other, just like the louvres.[vi] The sculptural discourse that claims Judd's wall stacks can claim Workman's louvre stack as well.

Painting: If we follow a discourse of painting that defines it as the establishment of a (usually vertical and rectangular) plane, through mark making, then Workman's louvre displacement operates as painting. The louvres mark up the vertical rectangular place of the gallery wall, and furthermore show that the windows are likewise types as paintings (since they are also vertical rectangular planes that literally frame various visual forms). Morphologically, the louvres share the visual language of the horizontal striped paintings by Agnes Martin, a minimalist painter who has worked in this idiom since the mid 1960s.

Furniture: Another discourse that the louvres fall into is that of furniture. Put simply, the louvres perform and function as shelving, specifically at the size and height of book shelves. The bracket-less book shelving produced by IKEA comes especially to mind.

Interior Decoration/Design: But these louvres are also performing as interior decoration or design embellishments, like trendy skirting boards or struts that appear on the outside and inside of contemporary urban buildings.

Again, which discourse is the dominant or proper discourse of this louvre work? Again, the answer is all-of-the-above.

The contemporary urban as multi-discursive

After using the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* as the paradigmatic, if fictional, example of a multi-discursive thing, I went on to tell two tales of late twentieth-century multi-discursive things situated within public spaces, one in the urban outdoors, the other in an urban indoor gallery. Following the blogger Dr Joolz, we could call both of the spaces established by these multi-discursive things, 'spaces of uncertainty'. As Dr Joolz (2006) says,

> [s]paces of uncertainty… are spaces where their use as actual places, is not yet decided; or maybe there are multiple uses and multiple users; so it looks like some groups of people have different ideas from others about what should be going on in the spaces.

In other words, spaces of uncertainty don't have a *single enframing discourse* that locks-up the certainty of what that space is, and what it is used for. Rather, it is a space where the tension and disturbance of multiple discourses resonate within it. It is an arena of the contest of (discursive) ownership, as different users seek to appropriate the space for different (discursive) uses. Such a contest played out intensely in the case of *Tilted Arc*, and also in Workman's untitled installation in

albeit a less intense way (since the stakes were not so high, the work not so much of an obstacle).

That multi-discursive spaces are spaces of uncertainty seems simple enough. However, I want to go a step further, and argue that all contemporary urban realms – the public spaces (outdoors or indoors) of city-life – are *always* spaces of uncertainty, that is, they are actually, rather than just potentially, multi-discursive. A simple proof is this: can you think of an urban space where there are single uses, single user groups, where everyone has the same ideas about what should go on in that space? Rosalyn Deutsche, a public art critic and theorist with strong feminist leanings, made this point in her essay 'Agoraphobia' (1996b). The public urban realm is not a homogenous zone where everyone gets along. Any hope for such a unified social space is false hope or nostalgia for something that never existed. Democracy, which requires the public urban realm of debate and interaction, must therefore require heterogeneity, and heterogeneity spells conflict. As Deutsche (1996a:xxiv) sums up:

> Social space is produced and structured by conflicts. With this recognition, a democratic spatial politics begins.

In other words, democratic public space is, and must be, a space of uncertainty that sustains may local spaces of uncertainty and the alien things within it. Public space and public engagement, if it is worthy of that name, should be understood and promoted as multi-discursive.

Conclusion

The types of creative works and ideas traversed in this paper align more with the cultural-studies-like domain of Visual Culture, as opposed to the domain of Art Criticism/Theory (which would want give preference for the single discourse of art, enframing the object it analyses). But James Elkins, a professor who successfully straddles both domains, has sceptically suggested that for all of Visual Culture's desire to shift away from high art and modernism, it actually lives in its hang-over, "because interesting writing in visual studies depends on version of ideas (such as the avant-garde, the value of difficult art, the value of novelty, the value of complexity and ambiguity) taken from Adorno and Greenberg" (Elkins 2002:95). In the case of this paper, the tropes of aesthetic ambiguity and cultural critical associated with avant-garde high art are again replicated. The difference here is where the ambiguity is located and then how this functions critically. For the multi-discursive thing, the ambiguity is a matter of its very identity (what is it?), in other words, it is a matter of its discursive ownership (what is it for? who knows and uses it?). And its critical function can play out in the contemporary urban realm as a prominent instance of, revelation of, and even encouragement of the actual multi-discursivity of the public space and public life.

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[i] My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer who suggested the relevance of this text.

[ii] For a very good and in-depth synopsis that teases out the films many themes and goes well beyond the scope attempted in this paper, see Dirks (2006).

[iii] See for instance Storr (1985), Jordan (1987), Weyergraf-Serra & Buskirk (1990), Deutsche (1992), Senie (2001) and Kwon (2002).

[iv] Serra made two claims in terms of site-specificity: that the work was specific to the site (it suited the site, regardless of what others claimed), and the work could only exist on this site (and moving it to another site would ion fact destroy it, breaking the contract made via the commissioning process). On how *Tilted Arc* relates to and has contributed to the evolving discourse of 'site-specificity' in visual arts, see Kwon (2002).

[v] Graffiti has a history of being framed in the alternative discourses of crime and art (by practitioners as much as by civic authorities), see for instance Stewart (1987).

[vi] I should note that in his famous essay 'Specific Objects' (1965), Judd argued that his type of minimalist artworks, such as his wall stacks, were in fact mere objects rather than sculptures. However, Judd is normally described as a sculptor and his works are to a large degree subsumed into histories (discourses) of twentieth-century sculpture.